

Martin Luther King Jnr : Legacy of community service

By

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Americans have since 1994 when the Congress of the United States passed the King Holiday Act, designating it as a national day of volunteer service, commemorated January 15 as a day of national service. The King Holiday Act was passed 30 years after the signing of Civil Rights Act which ended racial segregation in public places. The theme for the 2008 King Holiday is 'a day of service'. This year's theme, and indeed the King Holiday, offers us an opportunity to celebrate and reflect on the life of service of Martin Luther King Jnr., the legendary civil rights activist.

Born Michael Luther King on January 15, 1929 in Atlanta, Georgia to Martin Luther King Sr., a Baptist minister and Alberta Williams King, a school teacher and minister's daughter, he decided to take up the name Martin Luther King Jnr. Martin Luther King Jnr. earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology at Morehouse College, a distinguished Atlanta based Negro college in 1949. He proceeded to study Theology at Crozer Theological Seminary, Chester, Pennsylvania in preparation for his career ambition as a minister of the gospel. His performances at College would earn him several recommendations for doctoral programme. Although Martin was accepted for doctoral programmes at Yale and Edinburgh, he chose Boston University's School of Theology partly because Edgar Brightman, author of Philosophy of Religion, which had made a great influence on him, was on the Boston Faculty. On June 1955, Martin Luther King Jnr was awarded the University of Boston PhD after he submitted his thesis on an examination of the differing conceptions of God propounded by Paul Tillich and Henry Wiemann. Remarkably, Martin's analysis benefited enormously on Hegel's dialectical approach. He held strongly to Hegelian thesis that every system contained contradictions that would lead to its own negation.

Even before completing his doctoral programme, Martin Luther King Jnr. was offered teaching positions in several colleges. He turned them down, against the wishes of his wife, Coretta Scot, a fellow Bostonian, whom he married in 1953. Coretta recalls Martin's reasons for rejecting a faculty position:

He had this strong feeling for the masses. He said to me, I'm going to be a pastor of a church, a large Baptist church in the south...I'm not going to be on a college campus..I am going back South. I'm going to live in the South because that's where I'm needed (Garrow 1986:48).

This desire to be where he was needed most indicated that Dr. King had decided for better or worse to serve his community. As he would reminisce later in life, even his adventure in ministry derived from his passion to serve humanity:

I had felt the urge to enter the ministry from my latter high school days, but accumulated doubts had somewhat blocked my urge. Now it appeared again with an inescapable drive. My call to the ministry was not a miraculous or supernatural something; on the contrary, it was an inner urge calling me to

serve humanity. I guess the influence of my father also had a great deal to do with my going to ministry. This is not say that he ever spoke to me in terms of being a minister, but that my admiration for him was the moving factor. He set forth a noble example that I didn't mind following. (Garrow 1986:39)

Martin Luther King had job offers from churches in New York, Massachusetts and Michigan but his desire to be where he felt he was most needed led him to Dexter, in Montgomery Alabama. This was against the wishes of Coretta who did not want to return to the Deep South due to the persistence of racial segregation there and against the advice of his father who wanted his son to join him at Ebenezer Baptist Church as co-pastor. The younger King did not want to live under the shadows of his father but desired to carve a niche for himself. He rejected the relative comfort and safety of northern cities to become part of the struggle to end racial segregation and discrimination in the South. Against the background of the brain drain which is robbing developing countries such as Nigeria of valuable manpower resources that are not even being well utilized in those countries, Martin Luther King's example is commendable. Martin's example is also worthy of emulation to the middle class in the South who have the penchant relocate to more prosperous and safer havens in the North at the slightest opportunity. Certainly, the course of the civil rights movement would have been different if Martin stayed put in the relatively safe northern cities.

It was the recognition that there was a cause and that he had a date with history that led Martin Luther King to return to the South with all the risks associated with such move. Dr King decided not to be aloof. He felt he could contribute towards ending the status quo of racial discrimination and inequality which had caused him so much pain and loss. As a young person, Martin Luther King Jnr had watched his father refuse to accept second class citizenship status, such as being addressed as 'boy' and not 'Reverend'. However, the reality of racial discrimination dawned on him when he lost his closest playmate at Yonge Street Elementary School, a white child. Dr King's account of this is very touching:

This was not my desire but his. The climax came when he told me one day that his father had demanded that he would play with no more. I never will forget what a great shock this was to me. I immediately asked my parents about the motive behind such a statement. We were at dinner table when the situation was discussed, and here for the first time, I was made aware of the existence of a race problem. I had never been conscious of it before (Garrow 1986: 33)

This was but the first in a chain of painful experiences and losses that would change the life of Martin. For instance, while in high school, Martin was selected to represent his school in a Debate in a small town in South Georgia. He was accompanied by his teacher and spoke on a topic entitled, 'the Negro and the Constitution'. The debate went well and Martin was in high spirits. However, as they returned to Atlanta that evening, they were forced to vacate the seat for some white passengers. They had to stand for several hours and Dr. King recalls 'It was the angriest I have ever been in my life'. His initial reaction was to develop hatred for the whites but homilies from his parents taught him the problem was not the white individual but the system that established and sustained racial hatred. Consequently, Martin Luther King Jr. would go ahead to cultivate friendship and comradeship with white people while at the

university. He even dated a few white women. However, he had to bow to the advice of friends on the issue of marrying a white woman he had dated because he was made to understand it would conflict with his ambition to play a major role in the civil rights movement.

Martin Luther King Jr. began early to understand that he had to make sacrifices for the cause he wanted to pursue. Severing relationship with a dear one was one of such lessons. The other sacrifice was that of personal security. Shortly after taking up the pastoral position at Dexter, Martin Luther King joined the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP). He established a new committee in the Church called the Social and Political Action Committee. This committee was to inform the Church of the objectives and programmes of NAACP and mobilize the all negro- church members to register as voters. Dr. King's mandate to the committee was to make all church members registered voters. The emphasis of voter registration stemmed from NAACP's perception that the civil rights movement would not make any headway until coloured people began to constitute a sizable proportion of the American voting public.

His passion for ending racial discrimination and his commitment to local activism was easily noticed. He was elected President of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) barely one full year after he relocated there and would lead the city's movement for desegregation of transportation. Martin Luther King's role would attract attacks on his person and family. On several occasions, the Dexter parsonage was attacked by arsonists and bombers. He became a victim of false accusations and was even wrongly convicted and imprisoned for tax charges. Martin Luther King was not perturbed. According to him:

Once you become dedicated to a cause, personal security is not the goal. It is greater than that. What will happen to you does not matter. My cause, my race is worth dying for (Garrow 1986:84).

Martin Luther King Jr. was a devout student of history of struggles elsewhere. He observed developments in Africa and Asia where colonized countries were fighting for independence. He criticized the American government for supporting nationalist movements elsewhere but keeping non-white Americans as second class citizens. One of the lessons that King learnt from comparative experiences which included travels to Ghana-to witness the independence of the first Black African nation in 1957, Nigeria and India was the determination of oppressors to hold on to power. As he put it:

The oppressor never voluntarily gives freedom to the oppressed....Privileged classes never give up their privileges without strong resistance...Freedom comes only through persistent revolt, through persistent agitation, through persistently rising up against the system of evil (Garrow 1986:91).

He therefore recognized personal attacks as the price to be paid for freedom. His commitment to the struggle would culminate in his playing a prominent role in the founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). He would subsequently be called upon to lead the SCLC. By this time, Dr. King was sold to the struggle. According to him:

If anybody had asked me a year ago to head this movement, I tell you honestly that I would run a mile to get away from it. I had no intention of being involved in this way...As I became involved, and as people began to derive inspiration from their involvement, I realized that the choice leaves your hands. The people expect you to give them leadership. You see them growing as they move into action, and then you know you no longer have a choice, you can't decide *whether* to stay in it or get out of it, you *must* stay in it (Garrow 1986: 84-85).

He had attained national and international acclaim, featuring on front-pages of America's national newspapers and as Columnist in Ebony magazine. He was therefore in high demand. He was offered the position of President of Fisk University, which he turned down. He also turned down the offer of serving as the Dean School of Religion, Howard University, and Dean at Garrett Biblical Institute. Dr. King justified his action with these words:

My work in the South is not quite complete, or at least I have not been able to do several things that I would like to see done before leaving. The vast possibilities of a nonviolent, noncooperation approach to the solution of the race problem are still very challenging indeed. I would like to remain a part of the unfolding development of this approach for a few more years (Garrow 1986.96)

Dr. King excelled because he denounced materialism from the onset, a position that became stronger after his visit to India where he was touched by Ghandi's simplicity and honesty. Coretta noticed her husband was a changed man:

He didn't like the attitude of his father wanting money. His whole attitude toward money- he completely divorced himself from it- from the desire for money. He finally came to the point of where he, after going to India, especially, he said, 'I don't want to own any property. I don't need any property. I don't need a house'... He said , ' man who devotes himself to a cause, who dedicates himself to a cause doesn't need a family'. He had a family and he loved his family and he wanted a family but he said, ' But man doesn't need a family' because he had this terrific conflict about the duty to his family and the duty to his fellow men, and he really recognized his obligation to both. But if you are going to serve humanity you've got to neglect your family to some extent (Garrow 1986: 114-115).

This is why he was able to reject prestigious offers and remain committed to the movement. He would soon realize that he was not being fair to his congregation and resign his position even though Dexter was willing to retain him as pastor.

The demands of the movement were getting so great, and he really didn't feel that he was doing an adequate job of pasturing. That's when he decided to move to Atlanta. He realized that his responsibilities wouldn't get any less, but

je just felt that it was not fair to the congregation to give them so little of his time (Gower 1986:122).

He returned to Atlanta to offer fulltime service to the SCLC and serve as co-pastor at Ebenezer Baptist Church. He recognized he was overworking himself and sometimes tried to take some holiday but he increasingly found that there was no rest for the activist until his cause had been attained. On several occasions his holiday was cut midway by an occurrence that needed his attention. He knew too well he had become involved and could not give up. In his words:

For almost four years now I have been faced with the responsibility of trying to do as one man what five or six people ought to be doing...I found myself in a position which I couldn't get out of. This thrust unexpected responsibilities my way....What I have been doing is giving, giving and not stopping to retreat and meditate like I should- to come back. If the situation is not changed, I will be a physical and psychological wreck. I have to reorganize my personality and reorient my life...I have a sort of nagging conscience that someone will interpret my leaving Montgomery as a retreat from civil rights struggle. Actually, I will be involved in it on a larger scale. I can't stop now. History has thrust something upon me from which I cannot turn away (Gower 1986:125).

King had high and low moments. There were times he felt like abandoning the struggle, when he felt betrayed by colleagues and misunderstood. He held on because he knew he was pursuing a just cause. Remarkably, when the NAACP opposed his move to the SCLP and the programmes of the SCLC, Martin remained faithful to his philosophy of passive resistance, refusing to enter into open confrontation with the group. He said he found inner strength in God.

At a certain point in every struggle of great importance, a moment of doubt or hesitation develops...If there is one lesson experience has taught us...it is that when you have found by the help of God a correct cause, a morally sound objective, you do not equivocate, you do not retreat – you struggle to win a victory.

Dr. King had a distinguished career. He witnessed the introduction of the Civil Rights Bill to Congress in 1963 by President John F. Kennedy and subsequent signing in 1964 by President Lyndon Johnson. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 at the age of 35 becoming the youngest man to receive the award. He donated the prize money to the civil rights movement. All charges against his handling of affairs of civil rights movements he led were always founded to be unfounded. He also worked to issues aimed at ending economic exploitation, poverty and unemployment. He remained committed to his advocacy of non-violent mobilization for positive change. This was despite the fact that his campaign for non-violence did not deter those who felt violence had to be used to maintain the status quo. On 4th April 1968 an assassin's bullet killed King in Memphis, Tennessee where he had gone for a speaking engagement. But his work lives on after him. Today we celebrate his life of service. He served at the

grassroots and valued the contributions of ordinary people in the struggle for change. We celebrate a life of selfless leadership so much in high demand in this generation and in our nation, Nigeria.

References

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